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HOW DO WE CLOSE THE SKILLS GAP?

Leading industry and DE&I figures joined *BE News* and RICS for a lively and important debate on what the built environment industry should be doing to attract and retain talent

INDUSTRY GUESTS:

Professor George Agyekum-Mensah, Head of School – Built Environment, London South Bank University

Kwamena Beecham, Founder, +TwoThreeThree

Charlotte Bradley, Head of HR, Workman

Sue Brown, Managing Director, Real Estate Balance

Adrian Dobson, Executive Director Knowledge and Standards, RIBA

Sara Eustace, Co-Director, Accession Network

Richard Golding, Associate Director, Gleeds

Sarah Hayford, Founder, The Land Collective

Nick Knight, Managing Director, CBRE

Robyn McKenna, Chief Product Development Officer, RICS

Lynda Rawsthorne, Director, Property Capability & Strategy, Government Head of Property Profession, Cabinet Office

Simon Rubinsohn, Chief Economist, RICS

Tim Whitehill, Co-CEO, The Save Construction Initiative

Liz Hamson, Editor-in-Chief, BE News (chair)

Simon Rubinsohn

Labour has pledged to deliver 1.5m new homes over the next parliament and 'get Britain building again'. However, little has been done to address the elephant in the room: the massive skills gap in the construction and wider built environment industry.

So, how does the industry recruit the people needed to deliver the government's ambitious target? Could AI help rather than hinder progress, as many fear, and what else can be done to ensure the industry not only has the right number of people, but also the right sort of people with the right skills?

These are just some of the questions put to leading industry and DE&I figures during an animated BE News roundtable debate sponsored by RICS and held at its head office on Parliament Square in London.

Setting the scene, RICS chief economist Simon Rubinsohn gave an insight into the scale of the problem, noting that in its UK Construction Monitor Q1 2025, 45% of respondents cited skill shortages as a major issue.

"What is clearly coming back in our quarterly survey, whether it is from QSs,

project managers or civil engineers, is a consistent message about the challenges around sourcing the necessary skills for the industry to build the capacity to meet the ambitions the government has both for infrastructure and housing development," he said.

BE News editor-in-chief Liz Hamson asked what others around the table were seeing on the ground and what key challenges the industry faced trying to close the gap.

Richard Golding

Tim Whitehill

Urgent action needed

The consensus was that urgent action was needed to attract not just more people to the industry but more of the right sort of people. However, we should not be looking at how to close the current skills gap, we should be trying to understand how to close the future gap.

"If we are trying to solve the skills shortage [as it stands now] now, we're always going to be on the back foot," reasoned Gleeds' Richard Golding, who urged people to look ahead five, 10 or 15 years to the future needs of the industry.

He added that we should also be looking outside the current talent pool. "We need to be looking for people with non-cognitive skills and people changing careers," he said. "This brings different ways of thinking, different ideas, an enormous amount of diversity in terms of productivity and an evolution of processes, and you don't always get by going down the more traditional route of entry."

Another issue, said Professor George Agyekum-Mensah, was the disconnect between the industry and academia, meaning students were not currently equipped with the necessary skills.

"We need employers to say: 'These are the skills we require, the competencies we want.' We need more collaboration between government, academia, industry, employees and the professional institutions to determine [what] we are looking for," he said, calling for "systemic collaboration, digital investment and inclusive practices, and equitable access to education/training".

> ***"We need employers to say these are the skills we require."***
>
> *Professor George Agyekum-Mensah*

Tim Whitehill, from The Save the Construction Initiative, agreed that a disconnect exists between the industry and academia in the UK and highlighted how things are done very differently in Germany where he is a visiting professor at Stuttgart University.

"For construction graduates [in Germany], the goal is not to become a chartered QS or chartered engineer; it is to become a visiting professor at a university, where 80% of their ⩥

Lynda Rawsthorne

Nick Knight

Adrian Dobson

professors are all in practice," he said.

There is no such interconnectedness in the UK, he said. "We go off into our professional institutes, but who is there lobbying for policy and having that debate? Those that go into practice become chartered and try to excel in their career, and then they lose the relationship with the universities, which can be the absolute hub of our industry."

The conversation moved on to the role apprenticeships can play in helping to address the skills gap. Lynda Rawsthorne, from the Cabinet Office, said: "There is a common misconception that technical roles do not pay well, but in fact there are strong earning opportunities 'on the tools'."

She added the government was seeing strong levels of loyalty from apprentices and "in many cases, they're staying with us longer than graduates".

It was a view shared by Workman's Charlotte Bradley. "Our apprentice success rate, and the retention of that talent, is higher than our graduate success rate," she said, surprising several people around the table.

"Moving forward, we have made the strategic decision to lean more into the apprentice route."

Real Estate Balance's (REB) Sue Brown said many CEOs of organisations that were REB members had reported that apprentices often worked more effectively than graduates.

CBRE's Nick Knight agreed they tended to be more focused. "It feels a much more intentional decision to join as an apprentice, rather than think: 'I'm on this track, I go to university and then I do a graduate scheme and that's at the start of my career'," he said, noting "a real commitment from day one" from apprentices.

> ***"You feel that hunger and the desire to learn."***
>
> *Nick Knight*

Sarah Hayford

Kwamena Beecham

Sue Brown

He added: "You feel that hunger and the desire to learn. It is difficult to generalise, but you pick that up from the apprentices."

In terms of attracting new talent and retaining that talent, RIBA's Adrian Dobson questioned whether the industry's attractiveness – or lack thereof – was salary related. He noted that for junior members of staff, salaries had flatlined a long time ago and the industry had become over reliant on unpaid overtime.

"Whether our conundrum is widespread across the industry, I don't know, but you read about the very narrow profit margins for contractors, which is why they never train people," he added.

Employer attitudes

Sarah Hayford, from the Land Collective, said some of the industry's issues could be attributed to the attitudes of employers, many of whom have thrown a lot of money at skills over the years but offered little support beyond that.

"The reality is many young people are struggling in those [apprenticeship] roles through a lack of support, professionally and financially, and sub-par apprenticeship learning providers."

She continued: "Apprenticeships haven't changed enough and aren't being pushed as a good option, especially by parents and schoolteachers. The apprenticeship with the most improved reputation is generally level six degree apprenticeships and they are few and far between in this industry."

Participants were asked how the industry could change the public's perception of the industry and do a better job of promoting itself to a wider audience.

Kwamena Beecham, from +TwoThreeThree, said: "There needs to be a big shift. The generation coming up are not willing to be indentured to a company for 20 years because they have seen their parents do that and they do not have much to show for it.

"Students come from various backgrounds, which does not determine your intellect or skill sets, yet we champion those who come from backgrounds with which we feel comfortable and that causes us to miss out on a diverse talent pool."

Beecham said change was vital "because if you do not fit a specific mould, you are viewed as an outlier. Those who have been fortunate enough to come through the fire, get used as the example and treated as a token within the industry".

The debate moved on to at what age the industry should start talking to young people about considering a career in the built environment sector.

"Is it aged seven, 11 or do you talk to them at 16?" said Brown. "There is a real issue in society, where people want to become lawyers, doctors, engineers, accountants, but there is just not enough knowledge about

Charlotte Bradley

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>
> *Charlotte Bradley*

Sara Eustace

what the built environment does. Whatever the age, it starts with schools."

The conversation then turned to whether AI could help create new jobs, close the skills gap and be used positively by the industry?

Beecham argued that it could have a "massively" positive impact. "As an SME, AI is helpful for a lot of the boiler plate stuff I write. I know architects who use it to help with initial design iteration. Using AI properly is just as intensive as if you are doing it by hand. It is just a different level of skill."

Bradley added: "We're also looking at where the skills gap is, and we are heavily investing in AI, which is important, and helps us with future workforce planning."

Addressing concerns that AI could replace humans and reduce the number of jobs, Golding said there would always be a need for human involvement in certain processes.

"Take-offs, benchmarking, bills of quantities still need that emotional intelligence, a human bookend to the process to ensure professionalism, competency and, more importantly, cover risk and liability," he said.

Most conversations about the skills gap tend to focus on young talent. Several around the table stressed the need to widen the industry net to include people in their 30s and 40s upwards who want to do something different with their lives.

Hayford pointed out that there were multiple transferable skills from other job roles and industry sectors that could benefit businesses operating in the built environment space. "There's been an amazing push towards generalist careers, portfolio careers, squiggly careers - people from marketing, HR, becoming surveyors as an example, through a career change at their own

Robyn McKenna

George Agyekum-Mensah

workplace," she said.

Bradley added that internal mobility was incredibly important to Workman. "We might have talent that could sit in another area - someone we want to nurture and move somewhere else within the business."

To conclude the debate, the panel was asked what the sector could do to close the skills gap and how confident they were that it would be significantly narrowed, if not closed, by 2030.

Confidence about the future

Sara Eustace, from the Accession Network, said she was confident about the industry's future.

"Every conversation I have and everything that we have done at Accession has helped people change careers. The work we are doing, and Sarah [Hayford] is doing, is altering lives daily, so I am positive, even if it is one conversation and one person at a time. We've got so much capacity to do so much good."

Robyn McKenna, from the RICS, said "apprenticeships are doing well in some spaces. What is important now is how do we co-design that more effectively together".

She added: "It is not just about rolling out apprenticeships across the board. We need to learn from what has really worked and continue to iterate on that and share those practices across organisations. I feel optimistic we can achieve that."

Agyekum-Mensah called for the formation of a 'construction skills intelligence hub' to identify what skills are currently lacking and anticipate the industry's future skills trends.

"From an academic perspective, we need a systematic collaboration to design and deliver the curriculum or training that develop relevant competencies for employment ready graduates, and to future proof the sector," he added.

Not everyone was as optimistic about the outlook. REB's Brown admitted she was not overly confident the skills gap would close any time soon. "We've got a message to get out there about what this industry is actually about, both good and bad. We still have a long way to go in terms of how the industry treats people and deals with their expectations."

However, people agreed that the government's ambition to deliver 1.5m new homes, alongside the growing commercial necessity would drive momentum. □

> ***"We need to learn from what has worked and continue to iterate on that."***
>
> *Robyn McKenna*

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